



# **Jesus' Divine Design and Strategic Plan:**

*As Seen in Matthew 28:16-20*

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**By**

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Jesus' strategic design for the world was and still is: His disciples bringing new disciples into His family in which He holds absolute authority. His strategic design was His family, the family of God in which Christ remains imbedded as the sovereign leader. Christ's strategic design included His strategic plan to continue and grow His family of God by having disciples reproduce themselves by making new disciples, baptizing and teaching them.

This article addresses the backdrop of Christ's strategic plan presented through the eyes and pen of Matthew. From this culturally analyzed history and from the scripturally revealed plan, the paper will infer Christ's design. Applying Christ's design and plan to the modern Christian organization, including congregations, the paper will engage the implications and promise for today.

#### *Understanding Matthew in His Culture*

Recounting the birth of the church with a generation of hindsight, Matthew wrote the Gospel of Matthew to his church to minister to the challenges facing the Christian disciples in his generation (Carlton xii; Gundry 5-10; Krentz 23; Morris 8-11). As a leader of a large church made up of both Jews and Gentiles, he ministered to converts of the same disciples addressed in Matthew 28 (Gundry 5, 10; Witherington 46). Found in what we now know as modern day Turkey, Matthew's church provides a living example of Christ's strategic plan of disciple making for a missionary-oriented Gospel (Krentz 25-26; Westerholm 124).

Matthew built Christ's authority using an encomium, a Greco-Roman rhetorical tool telling an entire life story from birth to death, showing the subject of the story as an honorable person (Neyrey, Render 90). As Matthew writes, he paints Jesus' life mirroring perfect patron-client relations through Jesus' communication with his Patron-Father (John 14:9-11). Jesus received Client benefactions (power, commitment, inducement, and influence) which Jesus used to draw others into God's family (Neyrey 30; Robbins 79). For his faithfulness, his Patron-Father rewarded Jesus with the highest seat of honor "at his right hand" (Acts 2:32-36), giving Him "all power in heaven and earth" (Matt. 28:18). With his elevation of honor, Jesus became a coequal patron ("in the name [singular] of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit") and an "exclusive and permanent mediator-broker of God's benefaction" (Neyrey, Render 90). From that time, Christ gave the gift ("benefaction") of the Holy Spirit to all Jesus' disciples and continues to all the disciples to come through the ages. "In the Name of Jesus" disciples receive Jesus' continued benefactions of power, commitment, inducement, and influence; this makes all disciples a part of Jesus' patron-client system.

Matthew shows Jesus setting up "new rules" and a "new playing field" for the social and cultural expectations of the first century (Neyrey, *Honor* 227-228). Against the backdrop of the dominant culture rhetoric (Robbins 86), Jesus proposes a counterculture

or alternative culture rhetoric (87). Public displays would no longer determine honor and purity codes (76, 85), but in private relations between the individual and God. Therefore, as the disciples were faithful in new patron-client relations, God would reward them (Neyrey, *Honor* 227; Robbins 79). God redefines standard definitions of “purity,” “holy,” and “clean” (Neyrey, *Render* 256-260) from external to internal obedience (78-81).

Without the traditional, external proofs of holiness, God opened the door to His kingdom for “all the world” to be a field for disciple making. Throughout Matthew, “in parable after parable,” the poor, the weak, and the foolish are in places of honor (80). Jesus makes disciples of people without position and honor – fishermen, a tax collector, a revolutionary – even women follow him and minister. He ministers to the fringe of society and the unclean (81).

Starting with the genealogy of Jesus and the miraculous birth of Immanuel (“God with us”), Matthew built his case that Jesus has the authority to issue His final command (Gundry 9). Jesus the Messiah selected His disciples calling them into the family of God, reinterpreting godly standards for living (Malina and Rohrbaugh 335-336). In keeping with the cultural model of disciple-teacher relations, Matthew provided an instruction manual of commands for the life of a disciple focused on their master, Jesus (Wilkins, *Following* 190). The miracles of Jesus further His authority by showing Him providing power, influence, and aid as the mediator-broker of God’s divine benefaction (Neyrey, *Honor* 42). The stories of disciple building throughout the Gospel of Matthew culminated in these final important verses found in Matthew 28:16-20 with Jesus claiming absolute authority and directing the eleven disciples to go make more disciples.

To understand what disciple making means today, we must understand the first century greater-Mediterranean culture in which Jesus lived (Malina xii; Neyrey, *Honor* 4). Readers need to switch to a world of dyadic relations with individual responses enmeshed with their social groups; constant honor-shame challenging encounters; patron-client relations; and other responses culturally diverse from our modern Judeo-Christian worldview (Robbins 75-86). Dominate-cultural rhetoric and action found in the lives of the people of Jesus’ day rooted itself in the honor-shame public encounters (Neyrey, *Honor* 4-5). Matthew reflects a counter-cultural rhetoric constantly clashing with dominate-cultural rhetoric (Robbins 86-87). The extreme responses between Jesus and the Pharisees clarified a proposed change from the status quo mind-set of tradition to Jesus’ call “to a higher loyalty, the will of God” (Neyrey, *Honor* 125).

### *Introducing the Strategic Plan*

*Gathering the Strategic Team.* Matthew begins the Matthew 28 climax of his Gospel with Jesus calling His disciples to the mountain for presenting His final counter-cultural message. Matthew’s first century readers would have understood this meeting and message was the birth of the church, since the readers were already living in the fruit of that meeting (Gundry 8-10). One the essentials of this counter-culture Jesus identified was His family (Malina and Rohrbaugh 335-336). The obligations within the family included both patron-client relations with Jesus and obligations with brothers and sisters in dyadic contracts (Neyrey, *Honor* 105; Robbins 77-79). They would also have

understood that a disciple adopted the “lifestyle, teachings, and values” of the master of the family (Wilkins, *Following* 132). It is out of this setting Jesus makes His claim for absolute authority.

### *Jesus Delivers His Strategic Plan*

*Jesus' authority.* Matthew used the text in his Gospel to provide the reader a foundation of Jesus' authority. Through Matthew's Gospel, he built the foundation of Jesus' authority using instances of “ascribed” honor (Robbins 76) by his reference to Jesus' genealogy (Matthew 1:1-17). He “ascribed” honor by his affirmation from the Father at Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3:16-17), and at the mountaintop appearance with Elijah and Moses (Matthew 17:1-8). Matthew built Jesus' “acquired” honor (Robbins 76) using challenge-response confrontations (Robbins 80-81; Matthew 9:1-8, 10-13, 14-17; 12:9-14, 22-32; 15:1-20; 16:1-4; 17:24-27; 19:1-9; 22:15-22, 23-33). In addition, by His resurrection, Jesus established His power and authority over death (Malina, *World* 52). These examples from Jesus' life offer stepping-stones to Matthew's record of Jesus' final proclamation of authority.

Matthew's readers are now ready to hear, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18). Jesus' pronouncement paints a strong picture of Jesus as the one with complete and total authority over all creation. This proclaims Jesus as the only true God (Malina and Rohrbaugh 168-169).

Matthew connects Jesus' commissioning to Jesus' authority. Jesus ties His authority over all creation to his command for the disciples through his use of the word “therefore” (Hertig 346). Morris argues, “because Jesus is who He is and because He has the full authority, they are commissioned to go and make disciples” (746). Acknowledging and obeying Jesus' authority demonstrates the heart of Jesus' commissioning.

*Make disciples.* The central verb in Matthew 28:19-20 is “make disciples.” This is not the verb “make” and a direct object “disciples”; both English words make up one Greek word, ‘make disciples’ (Carlson 331). Krentz argues “make disciples,” an aorist imperative, “is the only command in the passage” (30). The imperative is important because it creates a sense of urgency about discipling, yet a normal part of daily living. Matthew is the only writer in the New Testament providing a direct statement by Jesus for the disciples to make disciples (25).

Jesus' disciple, as Matthew describes, differs from the common cultural definition of a disciple. The first century disciple connected to his teacher, learning from the teacher in hopes of one day becoming a teacher with his own disciples. In contrast, Jesus is commanding a total commitment to Him, a risen and eternal master (Morris 746), commanding the disciples to make disciples not for themselves but for Him. Disciple making demands more of a disciple than just words, it demands a total transformation “into the likeness of Jesus” (Hertig 347). “Disciple making is not a performance; it is total submission to God's reign” (347).

Changing the focus from the depth of the disciples' commitment, Jesus moves the reader to the scope of Jesus' command. He commands His disciples to make disciples of "all the nations." He paints the picture of the entire world (Hertig 347). Adding support to the universal nature of Jesus' authority, Krentz argues Jesus' commandment to make disciples applies to the "universal realm He rules" (34).

*Steps to disciple making.* There are three participles which tell how Jesus intends the disciples to carry on the task of making disciples: "go [going]," "baptizing," and "teaching." Each highlights a different aspect of making disciples. Each clarifies a picture of a disciple maker. Each connects the disciple maker to the master and the family.

*While you are going.* The first participle is "go;" literally in the Greek means "while you are going" (Gundry 595; Carlson 331). This participle "go" implies making disciples is not a special event; rather making disciples is an ongoing approach to life throughout each day. The idea of "while you are going" carries strategic thinking as its foundation, strategic planning as its approach, and strategic action in its application. Continuous witnessing about Jesus' message and doing what Jesus commands demonstrates what going means to disciples (Krentz 34). Making disciples should be what disciples do every day, not a special event from time to time (29).

*Baptizing.* The second participle "baptizing" carries a meaning far deeper than just immersing in water. First, when baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," the word "name" is singular, not plural, implying one God with three names; critical because of Christ's authority (Krentz 34). Baptizing into the name means "into ownership of, into the lordship of," linking baptism to the universal lordship of Jesus (34). Baptism is identifying with Christ and the new surrogate community (Hertig 347). Essentially, baptizing provides the door for individuals to birth into a new and deep identity and relationship with Christ and the new family of God. When Jesus commands the disciples to make more disciples, He directs them to make more like they are. Jesus had spent years to make the disciples and He wanted the disciples to duplicate what He had accomplished in them (Wilkins, *Discipleship* 162). Besides baptizing

*Teaching.* The third participle "teaching," follows baptizing and provides the instruction and modeling needed to know what Jesus commands and personally to know Him and love Him (Matthew 22:37-38) in way the disciple's life might reflect Him through obedience (Krentz 35). Baptizing precedes teaching because it brings new disciples to know Christ; into the ownership and lordship of Christ with a heart to obey.

Christ wants His disciples to learn all He intends for them to understand, and to obey all of His teaching. Jesus' strategic design in this action will reveal itself in the lives of His new disciples significantly differing from the lives of disciples of other teachers (Wilkins, *Following* 274-275). His disciples are not to pick and choose what commands they are to teach. Since Jesus' teaching is a package of truth, not of menu of choices, His disciples are to obey all the teaching (Morris 749).

*Jesus' promised involvement.* Jesus' promise to be with his disciples every day to the end of the age contains three elements. Morris teaches the first element, "and lo"

(Matthew 28:20), sometimes translated “surely” in the New International Version, draws attention to something following considered to be important (749). The second element “I am with you” begins with the “I am” in the emphatic first person present indicative form. Morris explains the disciples are not facing a promise Jesus will be with them just in the future, Jesus will be with them everywhere, and all the time (749). The third element promises Jesus’ companionship continues forever (749-750). God will continuously be with His disciples every moment of their life. He was with them during their baptism and while they learned about Him, His teaching, and His love. He was with them, and will continue to be with His disciple forever and all times. Jesus never leaves His disciples leader-less (Wilkins, *Following* 191).

### *Identifying Jesus’ Strategic Design*

Drawing from the action steps in Matthew 28:16-20, we infer Jesus’ strategic design for His church – universally and forever. Christ’s strategic design provides the basis of everything within a Christian organization. Christ’s strategic design guides the values, vision, mission, purpose, and plan. Christ’s design sets the standard upon which to judge what is important and what is not important. Christ’s strategic design influences organizational what is scheduled on the calendar, how they spend money, what is talked about, and what they pray about. Christ’s strategic design provides

*In Jesus’ Design, He holds authority over all.* From the foundation of real and total authority, Jesus gave the disciples the action steps to follow to achieve His strategic design. Through the use of the encomium, Matthew successfully established Jesus’ authority by presenting His life as one with perfect patron-client relations with His Father. In the context of Jesus’ authority and Godhead, He assumes the patron or at times the mediator-broker role in the patron-client relations with His creation. Finally, Jesus clearly stated this first critical element in His strategic design; His absolute authority (Matthew 28:18). Jesus’ authority is foundational for His strategic design; it established Jesus as the one true God (Malina and Rohrbaugh 168-169).

*In Jesus’ Design, He remains constantly involved.* Unlike when Jesus sent the disciples out alone (Matthew 10), in the final picture of God’s design, Jesus tells them He will always be with them. Jesus is not leaving them to their own wits; He will be there in the midst of their struggles and suffering. With Christ as absolute authority and absolute power, Christ established permanent patron-client relations with His disciples through the embodiment of His Spirit in them. The embodiment of the Spirit in Jesus’ disciples began at the festival of Pentecost, drastically changing and empowering the disciples to differ from others. The significant and exclusive element in this Spirit empowerment shows itself in the fruit of the Spirit seen in their lives (Wilkins, *Following* 274-275).

*In Jesus’ Design, His disciples’ give total commitment.* Jesus asked His disciples to make more disciples for Him; disciples who had counted the cost and understood the commitment to full allegiance to Him and to the family (Wilkins, *Following* 356). While the first century culture had many students or learners of different teachers, the connection for the disciples goes far beyond the typical learner. The unique aspect of making disciples for Jesus contrasted to other teachers making disciples. They were to

exchange the securities of this world for a security in Him (356). The total commitment to Jesus established new parameters to honor-shame encounters. Suddenly, dyadic relations within the family of God became a central concern of honor; life became a matter of Christ's honor (Neyrey, *Honor* 227-228).

*Jesus said make disciples.* In Jesus' design, when He said "make disciples," He provided an image describe by Wilkins as an inclusion into a group of individuals with a love for God and a love for others with all their hearts, strength and mind (344). Christ's design includes lives in continuous learning through an entire lifetime about all Christ has revealed and commanded. Discipleship centered on the person of Jesus Christ; in an intimate personal relationship with the living Savior (355). The design includes making disciples as a continuous action. Jesus paints a word picture of a disciple going about the daily affairs of life, while including the process of making disciples within the activity of life. Jesus' design includes baptizing new disciples into a new family, the family of God (Malina, *World* 211). Jesus design includes teaching which results in growth in knowledge and greater obedience toward maturity in Christ (Gundry 7).

### *Jesus' Strategic Design Stated*

Jesus' provides a strategic design for His creation as follows: Organizationally, Christ's followers called disciples are the family of God (a family) in which Christ remains imbedded as sovereign leader. Jesus places on His disciples the task of making new disciples for Him. Jesus promises to stay deeply involved with His disciples in all aspects of the disciples' lives.

### *Implementation of Strategic Plan in First Century*

Jesus' design aligns with His plan for growth. The design allowed the Jews and Gentiles who were culturally relationally dyadic to continue group and family orientation (Pilch and Malina 51). The evidence of Jesus' Spirit changing lives within the family was the greatest reason for the growth in the early church (Malina, *World* 203). Jesus' birthed His strategic design at the festival of Pentecost during which He poured out His Spirit on people. Willimon states one of the significant changes evident in disciples was the new boldness for Christ; a new Spirit empowerment (Acts 2). We read about this in Luke's summary of Peter's speech in Acts 2, observing the empowerment in the change in Peter from coward to bold speaker. We see the empowerment in the more than three thousand new disciples converted and sent home as new disciple makers (30-31). It was at Pentecost, Jesus fully fulfilled His promise when He said, "lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Jesus' constant presence within the family provided the leadership and empowerment for the Spirit's presence and its subsequent fruit (Galatians 5).

### *Implications and Promise for Contemporary Organizations*

Drawing on the interpretation of Matthew 28:16-20 in light of an understanding and analysis of the culture of the time, we can infer implications for contemporary Christian organizations. The implications fall into the categories of organizational

structure, individual priorities, the importance of spiritual commitment, and the importance of God's promise of His presence and empowerment. Taken individually and together, they have major implications.

*Organizational structure.* In Matthew 28, the only organizational structure suggested is the family, the family of God. The "family of God" allows for any number of structures possible for Christian organizations. However, there are certain implications for all the different potential structures. The essential of this counter-culture Jesus identified in His day still applies today as a counter-culture; the love commitment to the family (Malina and Rohrbaugh 335-336). It appears God is much less concerned about specific organizational structure and very concerned about the Spirit-driven love based loyalty and commitment to all of God's disciples within the family of God.

*Priorities.* In Matthew 28, Jesus identifies His disciples' number one priority as making more disciple makers. In many ways we could infer Jesus saying the only activity for His disciples is making disciples and all other activities need to fall as a sub-activity. When we raise children, we are raising future disciples makers for God. When we have a neighborhood barbeque, we are building relationships for future disciple making. When a Regent University Strategic Leadership student is posting on a forum, the student is one of a body of students (disciple makers) in a cohort (a family of God sub-group) in the disciple making business with other students.

The disciple making priority means when we eat, we eat to provide the energy to make disciples. When we purchase a car, we purchase the car that we might make disciples. All these and more would imply at all times His disciples are influencing others toward Him, in both verbal and non-verbal communication.

Organizationally, the same implications apply. Christian organizations are simply sub-organizations of the family addressed in Matthew; the family of God. Thus, a Christian organization, be-it profit or not-for-profit, is ultimately in the disciple making business. In a for-profit organization, profit is no longer the primary goal. Profit becomes a vehicle to provide for more disciples making. The question for-profit owners need to ask is, "how is business" from God's disciple making perspective? Everything we do—individually and organizationally—centers on Jesus' command to "while we are going, make disciples."

*Importance of Spiritual commitment – baptizing.* Understanding the full meaning of baptism holds significant implications for individuals and organizations today. For disciple making to be a first priority seen and felt through all the subtleties of daily living, today's disciples need to step into the life of absolute abandonment to the authority of Christ in all things. We need to think of baptizing in terms of more than dipping people in water and embrace baptizing as the process of birthing people into a deep relationship with God and His family; people called disciples.

*Importance of education – teaching.* Jesus clearly places education as another critical component of His strategic design of disciple making in our contemporary world. We see this carried out primary in three spheres. Disciples teach through words, through

experiences, and through modeling. There is potential teaching within the bounds of work. Education occurs within the world of friendships. Possibly the most influential teaching happens under the purview of father and mother. A disciple would formally and informally take opportunities to teach in any or all of these venues.

*Importance of God's promise of His presence.* With the advent of Pentecost and the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit on His disciples, the church changed from an organization of people to an organism, a body, a family of God with Christ's Spirit at its heart. His Spirit regenerates us and renews us (Titus 3:4-7), and His Spirit guides us and reminds us of His words (John 16: 13-14). The promise of His presence, His Spirit, provides disciples empowerment to be Christ's disciple maker, moving the disciple one step further than dyadic relations. The Spirit puts the disciple in the position of become part of triadic relations; God the patron, the person receiving discipling as the client, and the person doing the discipling as the mediator. The Spirit in us puts all human encounters as triadic. The person doing the discipling is never without the presence of God's Spirit in the center of the relations. This means all patron-client encounters are actually patron-mediator-client encounters; all triadic.

### *Summary and challenge*

Christ's strategic design encompasses all who would accept His invitation to come and become part of Him, sovereign Lord with all authority, and His family, the family of God. The elements of the design make up the same elements in the action plan. As part of a disciple's normal day-to-day life, make and build new disciples. Baptize the new disciples in an all encompassing, love and obedient relationship with Christ. Teach them to be obedient to all Christ taught and did so the new disciples will become disciple makers. To secure the design, Christ put His ever present Spirit into the middle of the design to provide all that is needed.

Christian organizations face uncertain times. Throughout time since Christ delivered His Great Commission, congregations and disciples have struggled with uncertainty. Yet through it all, Christ called His disciples to a life—while still full of uncertainty—bears the unchanging nature of an unchanging Lord with an unchanging strategic design and plan. The design has not changed since the day Christ provided it. The plan Christ uses to implement His design has not changed. Christ's design-plan, the only truly critical element in life, remains secure; an anchor in times of storm because He remains with us.

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